

Edward J. Blakely
Gala Rinaldi
Howard Schutz
Martin Zone



Keeping small cities beautiful

Measuring quality of community life in nonmetropolitan cities

A two-year study jointly conducted by U.C. Davis and Yuba City revealed that location, size, and rural atmosphere are the major factors attracting more and more people from urban areas to small cities.

To retain these qualities, planning and growth control are needed.

Less than two decades ago policy-makers were attempting to stop what appeared to be a decline of small cities, as population flowed from rural to urban centers. But, by the early 1970s, the population shift was beginning to reverse. New problems emerged as small cities tried to keep pace with too rapidly escalating needs of the new immigrants.

Several factors have contributed to the reversal in population trends. First, rural or urban fringe areas (suburbs and beyond) offer a sanctuary from the crime, violence, and tensions of city living. Second, improved transportation links have made rural areas far more accessible to both commerce and commuters. Third, the very affluence of the post-industrial society has provided more life-style options to large portions of the population.

Last, the quality of life, not merely the quantity of goods and services, has become an important consideration in selecting work and home locations. It appears, to some extent, that the social and environmental problems of the 1960s, rather than any governmental policies or actions, created the conditions for a revitalization of rural communities.

The California scene

In many respects, California has led the way in the national trend toward re-

distribution of the population to non-metropolitan areas. In the past decade, small towns outside the spheres of influence of Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco have experienced a 60 percent population growth. An added dimension is the significant percentage of retired or semiretired people and younger individuals who are abandoning major cities to seek alternate life-styles in the peaceful countryside.

Unfortunately, these newcomers to rural California are discovering their desire for a peaceful retreat into a small town may be impaired if everyone else selects the same alternative. Other subtle changes are occurring in rural communities as the farm labor force, which was once predominantly migratory, becomes more settled due to an influx of light industry offering year-round employment. This alters the economy and politics of small cities. Furthermore, these population pressures present new political problems, because long-time rural residents, farmers, and environmentalists are anxious to preserve small cities and their rural life.

Finally, small cities must develop improved planning mechanisms to maintain their attractive features, reduce the social and economic factors that led to their earlier decline, and avoid the forces undermining the quality of urban life. Recently the Community Studies and



Development faculty at University of California, Davis, in conjunction with Cooperative Extension initiated a research effort with one small California community, Yuba City, to assist that city and to develop a useful growth planning model for small cities.

The study

The Yuba City area, a community of 27,000, is 40 miles northeast of Sacramento. U. C. Davis and Yuba City agreed to undertake a joint two-year project to examine the issues of community growth, resident satisfaction, and planning. Yuba City was selected because it was a fairly typical example of a community undergoing the changes described earlier. The research focused not only on identifying problem areas, but also on testing alternative methods to arrive at reasonable solutions.

In the spring of 1976, U. C. Davis initiated a broad-based, community survey of Yuba City and its immediate suburbs (excluding Marysville) with both in-person interviews and a mail questionnaire to local residents. The purpose of the survey was to: 1) determine what residents liked or disliked about the community; 2) ascertain their preferences for various community or civic services; 3) examine the various trade-offs related to growth and no-growth questions; and, 4) explore preferred planning strategies to guide the



community's future. Over 50 percent of 2,000 households sampled responded to the mail questionnaire and 90 percent of over 100 individuals responded positively to the in-person interviews.

Results

The research effort produced a substantial amount of information on resident preferences. The following areas seem to have implications for other small cities in California, although the statistical results reflect a single community and may not necessarily be a guide for planning in other cities.

Community characteristics. The results indicate that three significant factors make nonmetropolitan areas, like Yuba City, preferred settlement choices—location, size, and rural atmosphere (table 1). These factors are more important than employment opportunities, schools, and taxes. Proximity to a major metropolitan area may reduce the significance of employment as a principal determinant. However, Yuba City and many other growing California communities are somewhat beyond easy commuting range of major metropolitan areas.

This result poses two dilemmas for public officials. First, how can something as intangible as rural atmosphere be successfully maintained? Second, size can best be controlled through curbs on employment-generating activities.

Quality of local government and community leadership. This is an important issue with many residents. Although resident satisfaction in these areas tended to be high in Yuba City (table 2), residents were reluctant to provide additional tax revenues to sustain high-quality public services. This represents a real dilemma for local public officials, because people's willingness to continue living in a community depends on the quality of





government services. Similarly, the degree of access people have to local government is equally important to them. As the community grows, both formal and informal communication mechanisms tend to break down. This leads to less civic involvement and consequently reduces public support for bond issues and other tax measures that directly influence delivery of community services.

Economic development preferences. Although employment was not the primary reason residents selected the community, they indicated that a strong, diversified economy was essential for them and their children to stay. In other words, people choose a place to live and then a job in that locale. They want some assurance that economic activity is sufficient to guarantee their future, lift some of their personal tax burdens, and provide career opportunities within the area for their children. The clear majority of our sample preferred economic growth activities consistent with the area's agricultural base (table 3).

Growth and planning. Implicit in this study was the assumption that people's preferences for community size would correspond to the type of growth policies and planning regulations they preferred. Interestingly enough, few people made this connection. A surprisingly large number of persons in the Yuba City sample (46 percent) desired few planning controls and no community growth policy, and 68 percent said the area should grow at the present rate or faster.

Clearly, if these attitudes were to persist in Yuba City and other similar communities, the attractive rural features would soon be lost. Growth management and planning have been viewed as nega-

tive forces in most rural and nonmetropolitan communities. Therefore, the public must be made more aware of the value of planning to achieve community objectives.

Conclusions

Obviously, small cities are faced with a number of important policy considerations as they plan for the future. Although smallness, rural atmosphere, and other intangibles appear to be their major assets, it is equally apparent that controlling size has negative implications for employment opportunities, tax rates, quality community services, and the like.

Small cities can and should seek planned and controlled growth that preserves such characteristics as community atmosphere. As a result of this research and similar efforts, the state legislature is beginning to examine current planning laws, tax structures, and related legislation to provide small cities greater options and opportunities to remain small without impairing their economic stability.

Edward J. Blakely is Associate Professor, Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences, University of California, Davis, and Assistant Director, Community Development, Cooperative Extension; Gala Rinaldi is Research Assistant, Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences, Davis; Howard Schutz is Professor of Consumer Sciences, Davis; and Martin Zone is Staff Research Associate, Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences, Davis.

TABLE 1. ATTITUDES TOWARD COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS, YUBA CITY, CALIFORNIA SPRING, 1976

Characteristic	Attitudes of respondents*		
	Like	Dislike	Neutral
	percent		
Geographic location	91	3	6
City size	83	6	12
Rural atmosphere	82	6	12
Physical appearance	67	20	13
Schools	45	35	20
Tax rate	17	45	38

*Numbers may not total 100 percent, due to rounding

TABLE 2. ATTITUDES TOWARD QUALITY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT, YUBA CITY, CALIFORNIA, SPRING, 1976

City service	Attitudes of respondents*	
	Positive	Negative
	percent	
Fire	94	6
Police	78	22
Public works	66	34
Parks and recreation	61	39
Planning	49	51

*Households in the study that were within city limits were asked if they felt they were or were not getting their money's worth from city services.

TABLE 3. SURVEY-RESPONDENTS' PREFERENCES CONCERNING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, YUBA CITY, CALIFORNIA, SPRING, 1976

Economic activity	Yes	No
	percent	
Production and processing of agricultural products	91	9
Medical and/or scientific research centers	87	13
Industrial research and development centers	75	25
Recreation facilities and tourist attractions	74	26
Nonmilitary government services and activities	65	35
Expansion of military activities	36	64